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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 002025

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [RS](#) [GG](#)
SUBJECT: GEORGIA: MISTRAL SALE COULD DESTABILIZE BLACK SEA

REF: PARIS 1529

Classified By: Ambassador John R. Bass for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary and comment. On November 13 and 16 Foreign Minister Grigol Vashadze voiced serious concerns about the potentially destabilizing influence of France's possible sale of Mistral-class helicopter carrier ships to Russia (reftel) to DAS Tina Kaidanow and the Ambassador. As the broker of the August 2008 ceasefire agreement with which Russia has still not complied, France would not only provide Russia with arms that its own officers admit would have helped them in the war against Georgia, but would send a powerful signal that NATO and the west are no longer concerned about Russia's intentions. At a time when Georgia faces a "silent embargo" on arms shipments, other countries -- notably Spain and the Netherlands -- await such a signal to begin their own sales to Russia. Such an opening of the floodgates could render an already out-of-balance military confrontation even more lopsided, allowing the Russians to assert themselves with impunity -- and delivering the implicit message that the west will not interfere. Vashadze requested that the United States push back against this sale and said President Saakashvili would make the same request at more senior levels. We recommend doing so, in both Paris and Brussels -- or at the very least seeking a commitment from Russia that these ships will not be deployed in the Black Sea. End summary and comment.

VASHADZE'S CONCERNS

¶2. (C) Foreign Minister Vashadze raised his concerns with us about the sale twice, during a November 16 meeting with Deputy Assistant Secretary Kaidanow and in a November 13 dinner with the Ambassador. He registered several specific objections. First, the fact that it is France considering the sale carries significant symbolic weight. President Sarkozy, representing the French presidency of the EU, brokered the August 12, 2008 ceasefire agreement between Georgia and Russia and effectively pledged the EU as the guarantor of that agreement. Point 5 of the agreement requires Russia to withdraw its forces to those positions held previous to the war -- a provision that Russia has not complied with. In fact, Russia has done the opposite, increasing its military presence in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and expanding its positions beyond their August 6, 2008 positions. Thus, if France were to approve the sale of any significant military equipment to Russia, it would implicitly intimate that the broker of the ceasefire agreement was satisfied either that Russia had complied with those commitments, or that the commitments were no longer binding.

¶3. (C) Second, Vashadze noted that the specific ship in question represents a direct threat not only to Georgia, but to the entire Black Sea region. Third, the sale is being contemplated in the context of what Vashadze called a "silent

embargo" against Georgia, making Georgia's attempts to rethink its physical security even more difficult. Russia would improve substantially its ability to project military power across the Black Sea littoral. Finally, Vashadze said that other countries -- notably Spain and the Netherlands -- were waiting for just such a sale from a major NATO ally to open the door to their own arms sales to Russia. A Mistral sale would thereby open the floodgates to new procurements for Russia -- procurements that could lead to even more destabilizing steps in the Black Sea region.

PUBLIC DISCUSSION

14. (U) The newspaper 24 Saati (24 Hours) published a front-page article November 18, written by a American analyst based in Tbilisi, that registers strong protest against the proposed sale. Calling the sale potentially the "biggest ever NATO country military supply to Russia," the article notes that quotes Russian Navy Commander Admiral Vladimir Vysotskiy as saying in September that "In the conflict in August last year a ship like that would have allowed the Black Sea Fleet to accomplish its mission in 40 minutes, not 26 hours, which is how long it took us."

COMMENT: THE WRONG SHIP FROM THE WRONG COUNTRY AT THE WRONG TIME

15. (C) Despite reassuring its people that Russia is not likely to undertake further military action in the near future, the Georgian Government privately is concerned by the steady stream of aggressive Russian rhetoric. The symbolism of France, the broker of the ceasefire and a major NATO ally,

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taking this particular opportunity to make one of NATO's biggest sales ever to Russia will not be missed in Moscow or in Tbilisi. Not only on the symbolic level is the sale problematic; this type of ship will give Russia a new capability to enforce, or threaten to enforce, its will in the Black Sea. This sale would render the already difficult task of getting Russia to comply with its ceasefire commitments nearly impossible, and it would potentially increase the militarization of, and instability in, the Black Sea region. Although Georgia, despite the introduction of vastly increased Russian military forces into its territory, has so far refrained from actively rearming itself, the acquisition by Russia of such a ship could exacerbate public fears and virtually force Georgia to seek ways to prepare to respond. The United States should take steps to discourage this sale, in Paris and Brussels, or at the very least impose appropriate conditions on the sale -- such as firm commitments from Russia that the ships will not be deployed in the Black Sea -- that would put any Russian assertions about overall capabilities, versus their intentions in this region, to the test.

BASS